

# When Crisis Hits, Culture Counts More Than Ever

*An Examination of What Makes Organizational Cultures Resilient and Enduring*



**PLANETREE**  
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# Executive Summary

**Economic crises, civil unrest, extremism and violence, inequalities and racism, natural disasters, humanitarian catastrophes, and pandemics are just a few of the realities in our increasingly complex world.**

These experiences and circumstances continue to challenge -- and may even re-define -- business-as-usual in healthcare organizations. To thrive in the service of our caregiving missions, healthcare organizations need to be responsive and resilient, ready and able to respond to emerging needs. This ability to be flexible while remaining anchored to a shared purpose is what fosters the kind of balance, stability, and forward momentum key to a successful future. This paper presents the findings of a series of interviews with healthcare leaders who have implemented culture initiatives. It examines the impact of those initiatives on their COVID-19 response efforts. Their experiences suggest that strategies to cultivate person-centered, caring cultures inspired extraordinary commitment, collaboration, and compassionate care that endured throughout the pandemic.



# Overview and Purpose

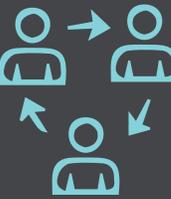
The purpose of this white paper is to illuminate how transformation initiatives can help healthcare organizations navigate unanticipated challenges successfully by:



**Aligning their teams around a shared purpose**



**Demonstrating integrity to their mission and values, and**



**Finding ways to engage everyone on the team to address the evolving needs of patients, families, staff and communities.**

We will explore this by examining how transformation initiatives, specifically in partnership with Planetree International and Language of Caring, have helped healthcare organizations to more effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

# The COVID Response: The Impact of Planetree and Language of Caring Initiatives



**The COVID pandemic took healthcare by surprise and has been a powerful reminder that we live in a complex and unpredictable world.**

The realities of immense stress and possible exposure put physicians, nurses, emergency responders, food service workers, interpreters, and many others working with patients at risk of contracting COVID-19 and spreading it to others. Leaders placed extraordinary demands on staff and absorbed the weight of wrenching decision-making. Everyone who works in the field has been challenged to juggle their work, their own health, and their own families. The unpaid workforce that has long been integral to our healthcare system, including family caregivers, volunteers, and patient and family advisors, was sidelined when access to care facilities was restricted in efforts to stop the spread of the virus. In short, the pandemic has tested healthcare organizations' commitment to their patients and staff and the power of their culture to support compassionate care, dynamic teamwork, patient and family engagement, and resilience.

More than 1000 healthcare organizations around the world have adopted the Planetree person-centered care culture change methodology and/or Language of Caring communication skill-building programs to achieve and sustain a caring, person-

centered culture. Members of the Planetree International and Language of Caring team have stayed in close touch not only to offer support, but also to learn how teams' experiences with these initiatives have influenced their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These organizations have shared their experiences, their struggles and successes since the start of the pandemic.

Before 2020, research and evaluation efforts for both Language of Caring and Planetree International initiatives focused on outcomes, including patient experience survey scores, culture assessments, physician and employee engagement and morale. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic raised new questions about the impact of these initiatives on the organization's creativity, teamwork, and resilience, as well as their ability to remain person-centered while managing through a crisis.

Between September 2020 and January 2021, we examined these questions by conducting Zoom interviews with 12 teams in organizations implementing these culture initiatives to learn about their perspectives and experiences. The teams represented healthcare organizations from 5 countries, with representation from acute care hospitals, long-term care, and outpatient care settings.

Respondents were asked to reflect on how their commitment to creating a caring culture through person-centered care and caring communication served them during the COVID crisis.



# Findings: The Impact of Culture Initiatives During COVID-19

Four members of the Planetree International/ Language of Caring team read all the meeting transcripts and each person identified both emerging themes and direct quotes related to each theme. The research team then convened to synthesize the dominant themes and select quotes to support each.

## Six themes emerged as central:

- 1. Our transformation work proved more important than ever.**
- 2. A pre-existing culture of caring and person-centered care positioned our teams to deal with COVID--a shocking, sudden surprise.**
- 3. Even in challenging times, no matter how difficult, we have to honor the essential role of family as members of the care team.**
- 4. Caring for staff was a quality imperative. Together, we could only do a great job with COVID by going all out to care for our staff.**
- 5. We acted on our commitment to caring communication not as a "nice-to-have," but as essential to connecting with patients and providing compassionate, quality care.**
- 6. Leadership support has been essential—providing a foundation of trust.**

## More about Each Theme, with Supporting Quotes



### 1. "Our transformation work proved more important than ever."

When the pandemic first hit, some leaders believed they had to set aside their culture initiatives because staff members were consumed by COVID challenges. However, very quickly, people came to see person-centered care and caring communication as more important than ever -- the very foundation and drivers for responding effectively. And they actively applied all that they had learned to ensure their care remained extraordinary even under exceptional circumstances.

- "The Language of Caring foundation gave us the ability to not only adapt, but to thrive in the most challenging situation we've ever faced. It was applicable five years ago, when our hospital was just functioning in a normal healthcare environment, but never more important than today. I don't know what we would have done without that foundation."  
*Patti Bradley, Sr. Director Patient Experience, North Kansas City Hospital (United States)*

- “Our organization’s cultural strength of person-centered care has been one of the elements that has supported us in coping with this situation. The teamwork, solidarity, empathy, and compassion that we have strengthened in these years have been elements on which we have developed our resilience.” *Dr. Henry Gallardo, CEO, Fundación Santa Fe de Bogota (Colombia)*

## **2. A pre-existing culture of caring and person-centered care positioned our team to deal with COVID — a shocking, sudden surprise.**

In the wake of COVID, leaders in the Planetree International/Language of Caring community shared that person-centered care and caring communication have been powerful drivers of experience redesign, innovation, and communication. These laid the groundwork for a QUICK response to the unanticipated crisis. Such successes have given staff confidence about their readiness to face critical events in the future.

- “The Planetree framework and the culture change that resulted put us in a great position to deal with the COVID crisis. We already had people-centered practices in place, and we applied them in our relationships with our patients and families and within our team. We’re very grateful, and quite frankly, lucky to have worked so hard that we were ready.”

*Dr. Roland Matthews, Medical Director, Georgia Cancer Center for Excellence at Grady Health System (United States)*

- “The fact is, focusing on caring communication with purpose has created a tremendous amount of energy in our organization. When people are so fatigued, we remember that people are human beings first. And they’re working for you and with you second. That’s how we’re getting through. The Language of Caring keeps us focused on our purpose and the essential elements of human compassion and human connectedness. It has made SUCH a difference!” *Dr. Thomas Smyth, President and CEO, University of Maryland St. Joseph Medical Center (United States)*
- The staff at Hamad Medical Corporation have “... all this energy, why? The people working in healthcare are special because they have something inside them, they want to help the patient! They are very, very passionate about doing something for the patient, for the family, for society. Caregivers feel that they are patient guardians. Anyone working in healthcare is special.” *Mr. Nasser Al Naimi, Deputy Chief of Quality, Center for Patient Experience and Staff Engagement*

*and Director, Hamad Healthcare Quality Institute, Hamad Medical Corporation (Qatar)*

### **3. Even in challenging times, no matter how difficult, we had to honor the essential role of family as members of the care team, and we worked together to do this.**

Even organizations with strong and long-standing foundations of supporting family presence and involvement found they were challenged to uphold those commitments during the pandemic. Rules that limited family presence were implemented for the sake of patient, family, and staff safety. This presented a wrenching challenge that commanded considerable attention and creativity to achieve a delicate balance between safety, risk, and compassion.

- “The pandemic has hurt everyone’s ability to make in-person, human connections, and such relationships are so important in health care. We have worked hard to convey the message that we want your safety first and we also know that you want to be with your loved ones. We’ve managed safety while also doing everything possible to support patients and families and helping them connect with each other.” *Malek Almoosa, Chief Executive Officer and Sara Almoosa, Marketing Director, Almoosa Specialist Hospital (Saudi Arabia)*

- “As soon as we could do it safely, we started to allow care partners back in for our patients. We’ve had support from our leaders and people across the organization who agreed, ‘Let’s try to do this until it’s not safe to do it anymore, as opposed to the other way around.’ This happened because of the culture here, because of our emphasis on patient-centered care.” *Pam Dunley, President and CEO and Megan Sulich, Manager Patient Experience, Elmhurst Hospital (United States)*

- “At first, we focused on regulations and trying to keep people safe. With our commitment to person-centered care top of mind, we then focused on making personal contact with families, so they knew their loved ones were okay. We also built a coordinated visit program in which we trained two family members per resident to safely come as essential care partners. Our Recreation Team also prompted sharing of pictures so families could see what’s going on in their residents’ world.” *Shelley Shillington, Director of Operations and Planetree Coordinator, Loch Lomond Villa (Canada)*

### **4. Caring for staff was a quality imperative. Together, we could only do a great job with COVID by going**

## **all out to care for our staff.**

Flight attendants tell us, in the event of a crisis, put your oxygen mask on first before you attend to your kids. They know that ultimately, your child's well-being depends on your own. Repeatedly, our conversations have reinforced the pivotal importance of attending to staff needs to foster employee health, morale, teamwork, and effective care.

- "Because it's a caring culture, we're pretty good at caring for the caregiver. People really are doing a good job of touching base with each other, and connecting with one another, and doing whatever they can to keep connections going." *Dr. Dael Waxman, Medical Director, Patient-Centered Programming, Atrium Health Mercy Hospital (United States)*
- "Our Planetree person-centered approach pushed us to consider our staff as people first and engage them in working out the best ways we could all take care of ourselves while we worked together to keep people safe and give them the best care possible." *Amanda Moody, Director, Planetree Institute at Sun River Health (United States)*
- "We've attended to our staff – going around to all the houses and doing huddles, so staff feel connected to the big picture, feel appreciated, and remain person-

centered and caring. We've helped both staff and residents feel a sense of well-being despite their fears. And we've made sure to LISTEN to needs and ideas so we could keep improving." *Shelley Shillington, Director of Operations and Planetree Coordinator, Loch Lomond Villa (Canada)*

## **5. We acted on our commitment to caring communication not as a "nice-to-have," but as essential to connecting with patients and providing compassionate, quality care.**

The events of this past year have underscored that a strong focus on foundational caring communication skills, especially during stressful times, is essential to positive and healing interactions with patients, their families and between care team members.

- "Another casualty of COVID has been that our best communication tools were removed from us, because of the protective equipment. Our patients feel estranged from us, seeing us only through a mask, a visor, gown, and gloves. We only have body language and our voices to let this patient know how much we care about them. So, we took all our Language of Caring skills—the skills from all 10 modules, and we applied them to PPE. We rethought how we could acknowledge feelings,

do blameless apologies, and communicate our empathy...We really had to step up and make communication happen, because we know that's the foundation of trust and reassurance, and is what our families and patients really needed the most." *Patti Bradley, Sr. Director Patient Experience, North Kansas City Hospital (United States)*

- "We have the mission of loving service and compassionate care. But during a crisis, it's so easy to default just to "head" communication. Because of Language of Caring, we now fall back on the Heart-Head-Heart method to make sure our caring comes across in a compassionate, heartfelt way." *Brenda Johnson, Vice President Patient Experience, University of Maryland St. Joseph Medical Center (United States)*

## **6. Leadership support has been essential to providing a foundation of trust.**

The ultimate test of leadership is a crisis. It has been fascinating to hear perceptions from leaders and staff alike about the most critical actions taken by leaders to nurture a trusting and caring culture. Common elements include projecting honesty and confidence, communicating again and again (and again!), being decisive, yet adaptable, staying positive and keeping everyone on the team tethered to a shared purpose.

- "I just think that our leaders' level of transparency has really been valuable. Every time there's a major change, staff know that that we're going to communicate, and that's what helps them get through. They don't just have to worry. They know there's a way that they can get real information." *Pam Dunley, President and CEO and Megan Sulich, Manager Patient Experience, Elmhurst Hospital*
- "On weekends, [our CEO] comes in, sits down, and listens to staff and says, 'tell me what you need. Tell me what's going right, tell me what's not working and what I can do for you.' And now all the VPs are sharing the responsibility and rounding on the weekends. We also realized that all our leaders needed help. They're tired and stressed as well. So, we did a 4-part series on resiliency with Language of Caring, which energized our leaders and staff. Leaders explored how our actions and behaviors affect staff resiliency, and their ability to take an extra shift or care for the challenging family or patient. And during the series, the leaders asked that we run the series for staff too, since we ALL needed to realize we have to take care of ourselves before we can take care of others." *Patti Bradley, Sr. Director Patient Experience, North Kansas City Hospital*

# Discussion



The organizations included in this study reported that their culture initiatives were invaluable in maintaining a positive workplace culture, preserving trust and partnerships, and performing effectively and courageously as they navigated the COVID crisis. What was it about their initiatives that made that so? Grounded in research on the influence of culture on organizations' responses to the unexpected, we believe that three factors help to explain this:

- 1. The power of culture**
- 2. Caring and the power of purpose**
- 3. Complexity science**

## Factor 1: The Power of Culture

Culture has been defined as “an integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas, and products that result in shared philosophies, values, assumptions, beliefs and attitudes that knit the organizational members together and define the characteristics of everyday life.” (Owens and others, 2017)

The power of culture is profound. In [“Culture: 4 keys to why it matters,”](#) Carolyn Dewar and Reed Docette assert that what separates the highest performing organizations from the rest is not clever strategy, superior products or better

people. Instead, it is the organization’s culture that determines HOW the organization does what it does, the common set of behaviors and underlying mindsets that shape how people work and interact and how they meet challenges as they arise.

They provide evidence that culture correlates with performance. Based on McKinsey’s research with 1,000+ organizations (encompassing more than three million people), those with top quartile cultures (as measured by McKinsey’s Organizational Health Index) post a return to shareholders 60% higher than median companies and 200% higher than those in the bottom quartile.

In his article, [“Why company culture matters,”](#) Russ Elliot, Founder of the Conscious Culture Group® reports that many studies demonstrate that a well-established “conscious culture” is an especially strong driver of consistency and high performance. For instance:

- Bain & Company research found that nearly 70% of business leaders agree that culture provides the greatest source of competitive advantage. In fact, more than 80% believe an organization that lacks a high-performance culture is doomed to mediocrity.
- Research conducted by Harvard Business School over an eleven-year period found that organizations that focused on shaping their culture outperformed their competitors:

revenues were 4.1 times higher, stock price was 12.2 times higher, net income was 756% vs. 1% and return on investment was 15 times higher.

Said Elliott, businesses in crisis need to show that no matter what's happening, or how hard the hit is, they are not going to change the culture their people have enjoyed and come to rely on. He concludes that, for many employees, work is a safe zone and it's the organization's culture that creates that sense of security.

Focusing specifically on health care, the study by Owens and others definitively links organizational culture to specific performance outcomes. Healthcare organizations that scored on the top quartile on the Culture Index significantly outperformed those in the bottom quartile on employee engagement, physician engagement, patient experience, and value-based purchasing performance. The authors conclude that by building and leveraging a strong, person-centered culture, healthcare organizations can gain competitive advantage and steer their people and organization forward. They go on to say, "For healthcare leaders to be successful in the present and future, it is not a matter of "white-knuckling" or "holding on tight" through change. They need to harness the power of the people who represent their culture.... Our findings suggest that leaders should pay close attention to the cultures they are fostering to achieve performance gains." They should be intentional about culture and rely on it to help people remain aligned and coordinated as they navigate turbulence and change.

The Planetree International/Language of Caring study substantiates that in the face of change and unexpected challenges, healthy cultures enable organizations to adapt and remain resilient amidst crises and unexpected events. In the interviews conducted, leaders repeatedly referenced their cultural underpinnings as instrumental anchors during tumultuous times. These included well-established "people-centered practices," "essential elements of human compassion and human connectedness," "caring communication," and "transparency." These elements were not developed in response to the crisis. They had been intentionally and mindfully cultivated over time, enabling teams to apply these well-established principles under unforeseen circumstances.



## **Factor 2: Caring and the Power of Purpose**

In 2019, the international public relations consulting firm Porter Novelli convened 180 CEOs who issued a statement that many believe has had a dramatic impact on the business world. They shared a new purpose for organizations, one that prioritized the needs of stakeholders above the needs of shareholders. They put forth that this was the key to a robust and thriving organization.

Then in 2020, in one short year, the massive global pandemic, economic freefall, social unrest fueled by racial injustice, political divisiveness, and uncertainty changed the world. It was all too easy for healthcare organizations to slide into panic mode. Said Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella in a letter to employees, "It is in time of great

disruption and uncertainty that our ability to stay grounded in our sense of purpose and remain true to our identity is of the utmost importance.”

The teams interviewed for this study talked extensively about their organizations’ single-minded focus on “caring” as the value and cultural strength that helped them navigate through the turbulence of COVID. Instead of hunkering down to focus on economics and instead of panicking, they embraced their caring purpose more than ever.

In “What the best companies to work for do differently,” (O’Malley, 2019) the author reported that the best companies to work for are those that have a culture of putting people — especially their customers and employees — first. They posit that, in these unprecedented times, the same “people first” cultures ---cultures of caring--that grow companies are likely to be the ones positioned to effectively respond to unanticipated crises like the COVID pandemic.

More than 60 years ago, in his classic article “Skyhooks” (1955), OA Ohlmann argued that people need “skyhooks” to give their lives meaning and to drive them to behave in ways consistent with humanitarian values. These are values, visions, or goals that lift people up from the fray of everyday life and stress, pressure, and anxiety in times of crisis. Over five decades, the Skyhooks model was embraced and elaborated upon by many of the best thinkers on leadership. (P Senge on vision; D McGregor on trust, T Peters and B Waterman on Open Communication; A Maslow and F Herzberg on Meaningful Work) and many more.

The teams we interviewed talked about the

pervasiveness of their cultures of caring and Caring as the inspirational value and purpose that drove them to make hard choices and decisions as they navigated the COVID pandemic.

From the perspective of Planetree and the Language of Caring, a caring culture in healthcare organizations is one in which all team members consistently show concern and exhibit empathy for all with whom they come in contact even when no one is watching. Interviewees repeatedly expressed how these caring attitudes extended to patients, residents, families and staff. Their comments illustrate how the culture-wide focus on caring energized staff to rise above their upset, their anxieties and confusion and focus forward -- collaborating, communicating, and innovating to meet people’s needs to their best ability. Caring served as a “skyhook.”

Several of the teams we interviewed described concretely the dynamics of using the “caring” skyhook to elevate their spirits and guide them in making courageous decisions. The challenge they described as an example: What to do about their organization’s commitment to family engagement and support, given the apparent conflict between this commitment and the safe-care guidelines for organizations caring for people with COVID. How could team members in a person-centered culture of caring suddenly cut off patients’ families from their deathly ill loved ones who, without palpable family support, would inevitably feel frightened and alone? How could they deny patients and residents entrusted in their care the therapeutic presence of those who know them best? How could people in a person-centered culture of caring abide by rules

that would have people suffer and die alone and would deprive loved ones of the closure of holding one's hand for a final good-bye?

While many other organizations made safety a unilateral aim and accepted the guidelines preventing in-person family presence and involvement, the teams we interviewed said that, for their staff, rescinding opportunities for family involvement and support was just not an option. Because of their strong, shared commitment to their person-centered culture of caring, the teams we interviewed said their teams asked not "IF we should engage families", but instead, HOW we will engage them. They proceeded to collaborate and innovate, experimenting with every possible way to connect patients, residents and their families, to overcome individuals' sense of isolation, to facilitate communication with family members and staff.

This example illustrates how, when leaders build organizational culture around skyhooks, people don't resist or avoid change. They focus on the skyhooks that inspire them and they strive to do what's right -- with courage and conviction.

### Factor 3: Complexity Science



The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how a surprise or unexpected event in one part of the world can have an enormous influence on healthcare organizations worldwide. In complexity science, a surprise event has three defining characteristics: complex etiology, rapid spread, and unpredictable scale and impact. (Begun and Jiang, 2004) More recently, Begun

and Jiang (2020) explored the dynamics of the COVID pandemic from the perspective of Complexity Science. The COVID pandemic has all three characteristics and it is far from over. And other surprise events are likely. Healthcare organizations need to prepare by becoming more adaptive and flexible, learning as they go. According to complexity science, "simple rules" like cultural norms and underlying values are important because they ensure that people respond to the unexpected events in a timely and coordinated manner. The Institute of Medicine's groundbreaking report Crossing the Quality Chasm (2001) includes "Ten Simple Rules for the 21st Century Health Care System." For example, "establish the patient as the source of control."

Such simple rules provide relatively broad guidelines so that people have considerable autonomy to respond, innovate and adapt to unpredictable events. Complexity science suggests that micro-managing unpredictable or emergent events is ineffective, if not impossible. It is simple rules with minimal specifications that make rapid adaptation and creative decision-making possible.

The teams we interviewed for this study described the "simple rules" ingrained in their cultures of caring that helped people align, coordinate and innovate. The simple rules? Be person-centered and caring above all. Connect patients with their families. Keep everyone informed.

# Conclusion



Said James Heskett in his book *The Culture Cycle, How to Shape the Unseen Force that Transforms Performance* (Heskett, 2012),

**“Cultures develop with or without conscious effort... The task of nurturing and changing culture is an important responsibility of the CEO; it must be led from the top. If you don’t believe it, don’t do it. Let the culture shape itself. It will represent just one more ‘unknown’ to deal with, albeit an important one.”**

In this study, clients of Planetree and Language of Caring identified how their conscious and deliberate culture change efforts, all launched prior to 2020, positioned them to respond more effectively and efficiently to the COVID-19 pandemic. None of these teams initially engaged with Planetree or Language of Caring expressly as a disaster preparedness strategy, nor had any of them predicted their organizational culture would need to withstand the pressures of this specific global crisis. Nonetheless, with the benefit of hindsight, interviewees

consistently drew a parallel between their culture-building initiatives and their readiness to respond and to weather the challenges brought on by COVID. They validated that a caring culture, compassionate communication skills, established teams and partnerships, and a shared commitment to person-centered care provided a firm foundation for resilience in the face of extraordinary and unexpected challenges.

These findings suggest that investing in conscious culture change is a wise strategy not only for enhancing organizational performance during times of relative stability, but also for maintaining those gains in the most unpredictable and volatile times. The experiences of those interviewed make clear that creating and sustaining a culture of caring in which everyone is clearly person-centered and committed to making their caring visible is doable and achievable, and it produces a powerful and enduring impact. A caring culture creates a current that catches hold and guides everyone to flow with it—being people-centered and caring above all in their everyday work. Aligned, people behave in a consistent fashion. Also, they will be equipped with a skyhook that will prepare them to approach inevitable crises and the unexpected with energy, creativity, courage, and resilience. It will elevate people to rise above damage mitigation and apply their strongest motivations and best skills to meeting people’s emerging needs.

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**Planetree International**, a not-for-profit organization founded in 1978, is a global leader in person-centered care. Planetree has partnered with more than 700 healthcare organizations across the continuum of care in 30 countries to implement person-centered care culture and quality improvement initiatives. It partners with healthcare organizations to drive adoption of person-centered care principles and practices by connecting healthcare professionals with the voices and perspectives of the patients, residents and family members who use their services. Person-centered care is a purposeful way of interacting interpersonally and operating systematically that recognizes the shared humanity of people and the uniqueness of individuals. In person-centered cultures, decisions, experiences, and outcomes are co-created to ensure explicit attention to the lived realities of those involved and affected.

The Planetree methodology emphasizes the quality of human interactions, the importance of connecting caregivers to the deeper purpose of their work, and practical strategies for engaging patients, families and communities as partners. These core principles have been consolidated into the Person-Centered Care Certification Program®, an international set of evidence-based standards that depict the person-centered structures, processes and practices that work together to improve quality of care and quality of life.

Planetree International offers a full spectrum of services to support organizations in achieving excellence in person-centered care. Skill-building sessions, culture audits, and compendiums of person-centered care practices help organizations keep patients, their families, and the community at the heart of every healthcare process.

Established in 2011, the **Language of Caring** program has helped hundreds of healthcare systems, hospitals, medical practices, health plans and long-term care organizations achieve an unparalleled patient experience and a culture of caring. Their culture change coaching process along with their proven communication skill-building programs help everyone on the healthcare team consistently make their compassion and caring intentional, visible, impactful, and genuine. How? By expressing empathy and personalizing their connection with people, to reduce patient and family anxiety, and earn people's trust, engagement, confidence and partnership.

Both Planetree International and Language of Caring have proven results, with clients noting improvements in measures of organizational culture, patient experience, staff engagement, and patient and family engagement. In 2019, Planetree International and Language of Caring announced a strategic merger that has magnified the global impact of both organizations.



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